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Author(s): P. W. Wilson
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# Sea-Serpents and Scientists

By P. W. Wilson

*The emergence of a fabulous monster in Loch Ness is greeted with debatable reserve by men of science*

It is no part of my intention to offer a belated biography of Bobby, the sea-serpent of Scotland, as he swims like a submarine in Loch Ness, leaps like a kangaroo in front of motorcycles and automobiles, raises his slender neck in order to gaze over the landscape with maidenly eyes, and implants his four-toed footprints on mud where plaster casts are possible. Enough that Bobby has been seen and, indeed, watched by an increasing number of people, otherwise in their right senses, that he has been photographed at long range for the movies, that he is drawing tens of thousands of curious tourists into the Highlands and that the British Government has issued strict orders for the protection of the merrie monster from molestation. Bobby may eat up goats, *table d'hôte*, with heather for salad. He may be accused of gently but firmly bashing in the skull of Malcolm MacDonald, the minstrel who appears to have been so incautious as to call upon the amphibian, uninvited, in a cave which he had selected for retirement. But Bobby is now too valuable as a sensation to be mistaken by sportsmen with shotguns for a deer of the forest.

The fascinating aspect of Bobby's escapade is, after all, psychological. On sea-serpents, ancient or modern, I do not pretend to be an authority. All my life I have abstained strictly from the alcoholic inducements which on these occasions are said to contribute to what, around Loch Ness, is called "perfect visibility." Indeed, I have to confess that it is not Bobby who, at the moment, puzzles me. What I can not understand is the strangely inhospitable attitude towards Bobby on the part of professional zoölogists.

Whatever may or may not be the truth about Bobby's identity, here, after all, is happening what beyond challenge has proved to be by far the most interesting event in the modern annals of natural history. Yet there does not seem to have been a ripple of attention on the placid surface of the Darwinian mentality. So far as we may gather from accounts in the press, not one apostle of evolution or expert on reptilian anatomy thought it worth while to take even a tourist's ticket on the Royal Scot and enquire of eye-witnesses around Loch Ness what they thought, at any rate, that they saw. These academic pundits, who are so fond of lecturing Fundamentalists on the duty of discarding dogmatic blinkers, sat back in their armchairs. They did not accept the evi-

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dence. They did not reject it. They simply indicated by their prolonged nonchalance that evidence—unless they themselves produce it—is not in their line.

For months, there were accounts of Bobby. But the accounts did not come from the scribes and Pharisees of the universities and colleges, only from the common people, and to apply a famous passage, did any scientific thing come out of the Highlands of Scotland? Complacent in a monopoly of all truth and all research, not one college, not one university sent out a search or research party. It was a newspaper—*The Times* of London—that instituted an inquiry, nor did the editors select a professor for the investigation. It was conducted by a naval officer, in whose shrewdness, otherwise displayed, the British Admiralty had every confidence. If it had not been for Lieutenant-Commander A. T. Stuart, a most astonishing phenomenon —whether it be defined as credibility or credulity—would have passed without one word of erudite record. And it is amid the enlightenment of the Twentieth Century that this pachydermatous indifference to what disturbs preconceived ideas is possible.

THE claim of science has been, it will be admitted, a little haughty. The mere layman has been told, *ex cathedra*, that here is an instrument for seeking and safeguarding actuality. Science, we assume, is a kind of ouija board on which man, immune from prejudices and emotions, lays a passive hand, and so awaits the automatic writing which he describes as "results." Positive or negative, it makes no difference to the Lamaistic automaton in his Tibetan temple what those "results" may be. The sole aim is truth; and truth, when disclosed, is accepted with a genuflexion that sometimes throws the doctor's hood over his eyes and adds the golden tassel of the doctor's cap as an assistance to clear perspective. What could poor Bobby do to rival these academic glories? His only gown was an antediluvian frill around the neck and that was conferred on him by no college—only by God—which did not matter.

It was Kant who, in the Eighteenth Century, confessed to misgivings over these scientific infallibilities. The scientist, so he argued in effect, is as human as anybody else, and never more human than in his science. His ouija board is no more impersonal than the pen that writes these words. It may be a subconscious impulse that sometimes influences the hand of the alleged automaton. But an influence is no less personal because the person himself is so absorbed in his predilections as to be unaware of it.

There is no more exquisite instrument of precision than the balance of a chemist. Enclosed in glass, the scales rest on a razor edge, and it is only by averaging oscillations that we can weigh one thing against another. What would we say of a chemist who allowed the positive mechanism of his scales to rust and the negative mechanism alone to operate freely? The whole of his calculations would be subject to that general and comprehensive bias.

And it is precisely this bias that the poor sea-serpent has had to combat. Whenever he has shown his head above water, science—instead of saying, "This is a head—let us learn about it all we can," has led mankind in an uproarious bout of slapstick. A sea-serpent! It is as absurd as devils and angels and all the rest of the phantoms that do not happen to be dreamed of in the scientific philos-

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ophy. Long since it has ceased to be etiquette for scientists to admit the possibility that, after all, there may have been an element of reality in Jonah's whale, and Bobby, with all his many friends, has suffered a similar ostracism. Like natural selection in Tennessee, they are prohibited.

Thought is not a single process like hitting a nail on the head. Thought is as complex a function of the brain as the use of a chemist's balance. It includes criticism, doubt, denial. It should also include a capacity to believe. Is it possible that this capacity—sometimes called faith—may be atrophied by disuse while criticism, doubt and denial are overdeveloped? And was it this atrophy that, of late, has lent such dignity to the somnolence of the zoölogists when, as a Fairy Prince, Bobby tried to awaken these Sleeping Beauties in the unfrequented museums where they enjoy their slumbers?

I hold no brief for institutions, whether they be sacred or secular. On the whole, I think that man is and always will be greater than any institution which he has been so optimistic as to develop. But I see no reason why all the brick-bats should be thrown at the dusty windows of the churches when the cobwebs in the colleges are at least as obstructive to the light of day. For the churches to be cautious over the truths of science which often last for a year or two is no more culpable than for the colleges to reject the truths of religion which sometimes have endured for a score or two of centuries.

The churches learn by experience, and if some of them are apt to be cautious may there not be a reason? It was a science, quite as clever as our own and similarly confident in its inerrancy, that in the Ptolemaic period misled the church into supposing that the sun moves round the earth and, unfortunately for Galileo, the church believed this interesting "result" of the latest astronomy. Over the solar system, the church was bitten badly, and no less badly would she have been bitten if she had pinned her faith to what Darwinians taught fifty years ago about the animal creation. What is there, then, in this most recent scientific handling of the sea-serpent to entitle Darwinians or any other kind of zoölogists to instruct the Pope or anybody else in the duty of accepting evidence? In the Darwinian Garden of Eden, the only serpent may be a sea-serpent. But evidence or no evidence, he is evicted from that somewhat pedantic paradise.

WHAT was there, after all, so unlikely in Bobby's maladroit emergence to the surface of scientific ignorance? For generations, we have been telling one another that the sea has still its secrets unexplored, that in the depths of the ocean there are marvels untold even by Beebe. Also, we are seeing everywhere the disappearance of species —lions and tigers and the rest—which do not happen to be eligible for the stockyards of Chicago. Naturally, we would infer that on the high seas, as on the prairie and in the jungle, there would be surviving occasional specimens of creatures, once familiar to the eye, and that these survivors, like fish themselves, would be inclined, more and more, to shun the course of steamers with their huge and powerful propellers disturbing the waters. The occasional appearance of infrequent monsters in lochs and fjords might thus have been taken for granted as a strong probability. Bobby might have been and, indeed, was actually foreseen in advance. Vari-

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ous writers argued *a priori*—as people have argued about undiscovered planets —that he was a likelihood and their arguments are on record.

But the prejudices of science could not be broken down. It was not only that Bobby was "unclassified" which, zoölogically, is tantamount to heresy. He was discovered by the wrong people. Why should professors who have devoted their entire lives to adding alphabets to illustrious names listen quietly and courteously to mere farmers and young ladies who have only their eyes to guide them, and to other Galilean witnesses? If Bobby wants to be believed, he must flap his way on to the campus at Yale or the King's Parade at Cambridge and, in the language of polysyllabic correctitude, prove that his blunt tail accords strictly with the Proterozoic fossils there held to be supreme over plesiosaurian theses. Even so, he must produce clear proof that he is not in reality a humorous emanation of some dramatic society that is fed up on Sophocles and prefers to cultivate the deceptive novelties of mammalian impersonation.

Basking amid a wilderness of scientific skepticism, Bobby may recognize friendly companions. Over meteorites —to give an instance—scientists are now most eloquent. Really, one would suppose that meteorites are to be included among scientific "results." If, however, scientists had had their way, the very word meteorite would have been unknown. So impervious to this particular new knowledge was the scientific cranium that, as a matter of fact, one planet had to be literally bombarded with thousands of meteorites before the slightest impression was made on what Dempsey might call the scientific ivory.

How absurd to the physicist seemed these legendary thunderbolts, hurled by Jove like lightning onto this superstitious earth! How preposterous to take seriously the image at Ephesus that fell from Jupiter and was mentioned—sure indication of unreliability —in the Bible! It is true that the thunderbolts, like high explosive shells, left cavities, and that sometimes they could be dug out, unexploded. But these authorities who accused William Jennings Bryan of refusing to read the writing on the rocks, persisted in declaring that the rocks themselves were no more than a myth. As the *Encyclopædia Britannica* puts it, with bland and unrepentent irony, "nevertheless it was not until after the publication of the detailed report made by the French physicist Biot on the marvellous fall of about 2,000 stones which took place at L'Aigle in France on April 26, 1803, that the fact of solid bodies falling from outer space was finally accepted by scientists."

As long ago as 1892, Dr. A. C. Oudemans of Arnhem, inspired by the precedent of the meteorites, collected no fewer than 187 authenticated accounts of sea-serpents or alleged sea-serpents, whatever a sea-serpent may be. That was forty years ago, and since then, there have been further and numerous accounts. The London *Times* republishes what appears to be a genuine photograph of a huge sea-serpent, washed ashore dead at Santa Cruz, California, in 1925. This photograph includes a background with people and it is not easy to see how or why it should have been forged.

IT MAY be said that all this is very unfair, that many scientists are sincerely and humbly treading the path to truth as they see the path, and that it is easy for a journalist, in his irresponsi-

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bility, to throw stones at people who at least avoid as far as possible the temptations of an egotistic publicity, preferring the monasticism of the laboratory, faculty clubs and other brain trusts. Just so. But if scientists are to be judged by those among them who are humble and sincere, so should clergy be judged. The yardstick, like the dollar, should be honest.

Every profession, journalism and other forms of science included, is a trade union, and no trade union is impartial when its susceptibilities are aroused. A recent illustration of scientific *intransigeance*, equal in all respects to the spiritual *intransigeance* of Savonarola, has deeply impressed public opinion, as it happens, in Great Britain.

There was a young man called Herbert Atkinson Barker who trained himself for the law. But in the tips of his fingers there was genius as definite as the genius in the tips of the fingers of a Brahms or a Rubinstein, and Barker could not be discouraged from setting bones that were out of joint. No fewer than 40,000 cases were treated successfully by what today is known as manipulative surgery, and on this mission of mercy the medical authorities declared relentless war. Any doctor who dared to have dealings with Barker was driven out of the profession. The qualified practitioners would neither set bones themselves nor permit any "amateur" to set them.

The endeavor to treat Barker as a criminal became a national scandal. In Palace and Parliament, there arose a growing indignation and, in due course, the medical authorities, despite all their prestige, were overruled. Barker received a knighthood and the active campaign against him was stopped. Only the sullen enmity smoldered on. And the whole of that persecution of scientific initiative was defended as modern science by the persecutors. To the surgeons, bone-setting was the sea-serpent.

If this is the way in which scientists behave when, in his consideration for the comfort of His children, the Almighty raises up some special agent of the healing process, what can we expect when, at Lourdes or anywhere else, an amelioration of suffering is attributed to the divine love? Every case at Lourdes is medically certified. The certificates are signed by doctors who are non-Catholic as well as Catholic. But does that make any difference? Miracles are like the meteorites of yesterday and the sea-serpents of today. To scientists of the skeptical school, it would be most humiliating to admit their validity. Even to suggest such a surrender of professional pride is an insult.

A result of closing the eyes is that one does not see. An immense mass of information about meteorites and about miracles has been diverted from the avenues of knowledge by the non-receptivity of scholarship. Instead of collecting testimony, the scientist has belittled it. The search for truth has been standardized as a censorship.

So with the sea-serpent. Any one sensibly solicitous for the truth about leviathans and behemoths, lashing their tails in deep waters, would have encouraged the officers of ships to record precisely whatever they might see of the unusual during a voyage. Nine out of ten of such officers are not only trained to keep an accurate log book but are known to be personally reliable in their observations. At little expense, a vast volume of varied impressions, seafaring as well as sea-serpentine, could have been collected.

But what has been the policy pur-

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sued? The sailors have been forced by ridicule into silence. The best of them—for instance, in navies—have known that merely to hint at a head on a neck amid the waves would be to ruin all chance of promotion. Where sailors have made so bold as to state what they have observed, the account has been dismissed as one of those sea-serpent stories that enliven the silly season. Some of the stories are, doubtless, only stories. Some of the sea-serpents may be—as one theory has it—the tentacles of great squids. But one thing is certain. In his own special field, the scientist has left on record what can only be described as a failure to overcome the engrained prejudices of what has been organized into a powerful and frequently intolerant hierarchy over the realm of knowledge.

# Winter Tree

By Bernice Kenyon

What is there colder than the leafless tree—
The snowless tree, that every wind harasses,
Lifting its bitter boughs defiantly
From roots like iron among the frozen grasses,
Waiting for night to take the stony slope—
A restless night with sharp high stars attending—
What is there colder and with less of hope
Than this bleak tree, in winds that have no ending?

Oh to be quiet in the creeping frost—
To stand unmoved, unheeded, and at peace;
Clouds closed above till every star is lost;
The night grown still at last—to stand released
From this long strife with all the winds that blow—
Warm—almost warm—under soft falling snow!

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